

# NORTHERN EUROPEAN METALPOINT DRAWINGS

## TECHNICAL EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS



The British  
Museum

JOANNA RUSSELL,  
JUDITH RAYNER AND  
JENNY BESCOBY

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*Front cover:* Detail of *St Mary Magdalene*, after Rogier van der Weyden (1910,0212.204). Left, raking light; right, transmitted light, showing the use of blind stylus.

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## 2 Masters of metalpoint in northern Europe

GIULIA BARTRUM AND AN VAN CAMP

The process of drawing in metalpoint derived ultimately from the technique of manuscript illumination in which religious texts on vellum and parchment were decorated with floriated initials and elaborate borders drawn in lead-point and other metal styli before being coloured with ink, wash, bodycolour and gold leaf. This work was originally carried out by scribes in monasteries, but during the 13th century commercial illuminators had become well established in Paris, Rome and cities in the Netherlands. For artists, drawing in metalpoint was important from at least around 1400<sup>1</sup> and during the 15th century it was frequently used in workshops of the Low Countries (modern-day Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, northern France and western Germany). The region enjoyed great prosperity at that time as it was the centre of European trade and craftsmanship. Successful painters often supervised large workshops in which they employed numerous assistants in order to meet the demand for religious altarpieces and portraits. Many drawings were produced in these workshops, mainly as preparatory studies but also as copies of finished work to be used as a record after the works had left the studio. This practice ensured that popular compositions and motifs were preserved for future reference. However, because drawings were not consistently preserved or actively collected in the 15th century, few northern European drawings have survived and metalpoint drawings are particularly rare. Perhaps because of the preparation and expense involved in working with the precise technique of metalpoint, it seems only to have been used in specific circumstances when the finest detail was required, for example in portrait studies or to make copies of other works of art, mostly paintings [2]. This is not especially surprising as highly detailed and life-like studies were required in order to render a realistic portrayal of the sitter or to reproduce painterly textures accurately with a combination of lines, dashes and hatching for which metalpoint was well suited. Many extant northern European early metalpoint drawings show heads or reproductions of finished paintings.

Although these drawings are generally of very high quality – one of the reasons they have survived for six centuries – only a handful can be attributed to a named master. Artists of the 15th century did not usually sign their works of art and any attribution depends on the quality of the

drawing and its relationship to other documented works of art. The few works that have been accepted as original studies are mostly portraits, a well-known example being the *Portrait of a man* (Niccolo Albergati?), Figure 2.1.<sup>2</sup> Generally recognised as the only surviving drawing created by Jan van Eyck, it was made in preparation for a painting of the same sitter.

Another stunning sheet attributed to a known artist is *Portrait of an unknown young woman* (1874,0808.2266),<sup>3</sup> which is considered to be the only autograph drawing to have survived by the Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden (c.1399–1464), Figure 4.15. Van der Weyden was a painter who worked in Brussels between the 1430s and 1460s. Like Jan van Eyck, he was very popular during his lifetime and ran a large workshop in order to fulfil the demand for mainly religious triptychs and portraits. The present sheet is of the highest quality, drawn in a very controlled manner, and truly compels the viewer: while the face is



FIGURE 2.1 *Portrait of a man* (Niccolo Albergati?) by Jan van Eyck, c.1438. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, inv. no. C775 (Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).



FIGURE 2.2 *St Mary Magdalene* by Rogier van der Weyden, 1452/3. Right-hand wing of the *Braque Triptych*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. RF2063 (© RMN – Grand Palais/ Art Resource, NY; photo: René Gabriel Ojéda).

executed in a somewhat summary way, the veil with its rich shading and depth conveys the different layers of textiles most realistically and the viewer can almost feel the veil and its glistening pearl pin at the top. It is exactly these three-dimensional, almost sculptural characteristics of the drawing that make it so successful, which is why it is attributed to the master himself. It is not clear whether it was a preparatory study for a portrait painting or if it was drawn after a finished painting. An inferior version in the British Museum collection (1895,0915.1000), either a copy of this sheet or of the original painting, is clearly by a less competent artist, probably not even from Van der Weyden's studio.

Other drawings linked to Rogier van der Weyden are, like the majority of surviving 15th-century metalpoint works, anonymous drawings that originated in the master's workshop. Although of high quality, these drawings cannot be attributed to the master himself because they are probably not original studies but rather copies after a finished work of art. One of the best examples is *St Mary Magdalene* (Oo,9.2) (Figure 4.17e), a drawing that for a long time was considered to have been made by Van der Weyden in preparation for the right-hand wing of his famed *Braque Triptych* (Figure 2.2), painted around 1432 (Musée du Louvre, Paris RF2063) [5; no. 19]. Comparison with the painting's underdrawing reveals that there are considerable differences [6; p. 150]. The metalpoint drawing corresponds so closely to the

finished painting that it is more likely to be a copy made after the painting was finished. As the painting was sold abroad, the copy must have been made quite soon after the original was finished and it has all the characteristics of having been produced under Van der Weyden's supervision. Although perhaps slightly less competent than *Portrait of an unknown young woman*, it is nevertheless charged with great emotion, reflecting Mary Magdalene's sorrow over Christ's death. Several drawn versions of the same figure exist (see for example 1910,0212.204, Figure 4.17c), showing varying degrees of accomplishment, raising the question of whether metalpoint was practised in the Van der Weyden workshop as part of his assistants' training in order to familiarise them with his artistic style.

Although the draughtsmen of these workshop drawings will probably always remain anonymous, it is sometimes possible to attribute several sheets to the same hand: the *Head of the Virgin* (1884,0726.27) and *The infant Christ in the act of blessing* (1884,0726.28) are executed on two separate sheets but made on similar paper and with a similar metalpoint, Figures 4.20a and b. The small hand in the lower left corner of the Virgin sheet seems to belong to the Christ Child, but it is not possible to determine whether the two sheets match up (see Section 4.8.1). However, stylistic similarities, and especially the competent use of blind stylus, make it very likely that the two works are by the same, as yet unidentified, hand.

Another anonymous artist who employed blind stylus to introduce highlights to the composition drew the dramatic scene depicting *Dives tormented by demons in Hell* (1884,0726.29), Figure 4.22a. This drawing, although very imaginative and lively, is a copy, as demonstrated by the fact that some details vital to the scene are lacking in the composition: for example, the chain that is tied around the man's neck, and which a group of four demons is apparently pulling, is simply not drawn. An almost identical version exists at the Musée du Louvre in Paris (18784) [7; no. 31, 8; no. C16], which again shows that these sheets are not one-off studies in preparation for a new creation but rather repetitions of an existing composition.

This small group of drawings related to Rogier van der Weyden and his workshop form a fine example of how metalpoint was used in the Low Countries during the 15th century, mainly for studies of heads and to copy other works of art. The use of metalpoint in the Low Countries gradually changed at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century. During this period it started to be used more freely and artists such as Gerard David made spontaneous portrait sketches which were clearly drawn from life. These studies stand in stark contrast to the drawings described above which were done in the controlled manner so typical of the 15th century.

The fame of Netherlandish artists such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden had a powerful effect, and many young journeymen artists of succeeding generations would have travelled long distances down the Rhine to see their



FIGURE 2.3 *Two studies of an old man* by Hans Holbein the Elder, c.1502, silverpoint sketchbook, Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett, inv. no. U.XX.(1-20) fol. 2v/3r (photo: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler).

paintings and visit their workshops as an important part of the training process. Two prolific German draughtsmen of the Renaissance period showed a marked fondness for the demanding metalpoint technique: Hans Holbein the Elder (1460/65–1524), who ran a large successful workshop in Augsburg producing elaborate multi-winged altarpieces, and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), the master printmaker and painter who worked approximately 150 km away in Nuremberg. Both must have known each other by reputation but no evidence survives to suggest that they ever met or influenced each other in their working practices. However, a study of their metalpoints shows that an underlying fondness by both artists for the delicacy of facial expression and portraiture, which the subtlety of metalpoint could convey, was of paramount importance.

Well over 100 metalpoints have survived by Hans Holbein the Elder and his workshop.<sup>4</sup> It is highly probable that he visited the Netherlands during his journeyman years before 1490 and although Augsburg had a good tradition of portraiture, Holbein must have been truly inspired by the superbly realistic portraits of older Netherlandish artists that he saw on his travels. It is likely that he encountered the practice of making silverpoint studies from life, similar to the pioneering work of Jan van Eyck (see Figure 2.1), and the studies of heads and hands made by Gerard David (Musée du Louvre, Paris, RF3812 and 20649) [12; pp. 56–7]. Throughout his career, Holbein specialised in metalpoint face and figure studies taken from life, drawn on uniformly small sheets, for which he must have maintained a large stock of sketchbooks with ready-prepared paper in his studio. Two of these sketchbooks have survived in the Kunstmuseum, Basel, and were recorded intact in an early inventory of the Amerbach collection, of

which one has survived today within its original covers.<sup>5</sup> It includes a striking study of a toothless old man (Figure 2.3), which together with other heads and studies of feet and hands, was then used by Holbein in his altarpiece dated 1502 for the Cistercian monastery in Kaisheim near Donauwörth.<sup>6</sup> Holbein's *Head of a man turned to the left* (1885,0509.1612) in the British Museum (see Section 5) is a similarly naturalistic study from life which the artist incorporated into his stock to be used as source material for his altarpieces.

On the verso of this sheet is a very different type of silverpoint: a study related to a silver statuette of St Sebastian of 1497 (see Section 5) cast by an Augsburg goldsmith for Abbot Georg Kastner (d.1509) of the Cistercian monastery in Kaisheim mentioned above. In an exceptionally fortunate case of survival, this statuette belongs to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (M.27-2001) [15; cat. 162] allowing a close comparison that shows something of the relationship between designer and goldsmith. Instead of focusing on facial expression or gesture taken from life, Holbein has shown the whole piece, with the saint bound to a tree and pierced by arrows, on top of a simple oval base. This makes it more likely that the drawing records the appearance of a wooden model made in the goldsmith's workshop before the final piece, with its highly decorated base containing a relic, was cast.

Generally, Holbein's sitters in his metalpoints are so vividly portrayed they must have been well known to him. These include his drawings of family members, such as the beautiful portrait of his sons, dated 1511 and inscribed with their names and ages (Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett) [12; p. 68], the portrait of his brother Sigmund of 1512 (1895,0915.987) (see Section 5), and his self-portrait of 1516



FIGURE 2.4 *Head of a young man* by Albrecht Dürer, 1503. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, inv. no. 1955.1835 (image © Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA).

(Chantilly, Musée Condé) [16; cat. 15]. Holbein used this drawing and a likeness of his son Hans as models for beggars in his altarpiece of St Sebastian (Munich, Alte Pinakothek). However, the large majority of Holbein's remarkable silverpoint portraits are not connected with paintings – they represent Augsburg figures and are inscribed with names and occupations. Several have had outlines reinforced or were copied by contemporaries in Holbein's workshop as if to emphasise the identities of these figures for the purpose of a reference work. They include portraits of leading members of the powerful Fugger family of bankers (Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett) [12; p. 85] or of abbots, monks and leading architects of his day [17; pp. 282–5]. Although the original purpose of these silverpoints remains unclear, Holbein and his workshop have created for posterity a visual microcosm of Augsburg civic and religious society.

Just over 80 of some 970 drawings by Dürer to have survived have been described as metalpoint. Many of these are in poor condition and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between silverpoint and the softer, less demanding leadpoint, or even black chalk; but again, the focus is on portraiture. Dürer's very earliest drawing – a remarkable silverpoint *Self-portrait at the age of thirteen* (Albertina, Vienna 4839) [12; p. 64] – was made under the guidance of his goldsmith father, Albrecht Dürer the Elder who, to judge from a self-portrait drawn at about the same period (Albertina, Vienna 4846), was also highly accomplished in the technique [18; pp. 93–9]. The idiosyncratic features of Dürer's magnificent *Angel playing a lute* of 1497 (Berlin,

Kupferstichkabinett) [12; p. 70] are clearly taken from a model. The purpose of this drawing is not known, but it may be loosely connected with figures of angels on which Dürer was working in abundance for his large series of woodcuts of the period: the *Apocalypse*, *Large Passion* and *Life of the Virgin*. A few years later, his *Portrait of a young man* of 1503 (Williamstown, Clark Institute, Figure 2.4) reveals a mixture of metalpoint with pen and brown ink and white heightening to create the effect of light moving over a face to give the hint of a smile. The surface texture of the ground combined with the different techniques contributes to this effect and emphasises Dürer's deep interest in the evocation of mood through facial expression and fleeting movement. His radically different *Head of a woman* (1895,0915.978) (Figure 4.26c), drawn a few years later, demonstrates how he was inspired by his journey to Italy from 1505–1507. The Italian ideal of beauty is evident from the oval shape, calm demeanour and downward expression, and the technique is quite different to traditional German metalpoints. The silverpoint drawing is combined with shading in chalk (or possibly brush and wash) and white heightening over blind stylus. The orange-pink prepared paper recalls the strongly coloured grounds of early Italian Renaissance artists and makes it clear that Dürer must have seen drawings of this type while in Italy. His *Head of a boy* (SL,5218.41) (Figure 4.26a) made at about the same date is also remarkable for the delicate sensation of light and shade on the boy's face expressed in fine silverpoint lines. Of all Dürer's drawings, this sheet calls to mind his sophisticated use of the engraver's burin.

As with Holbein the Elder, the use of metalpoint for family portraits was especially important to Dürer. He drew his brother, Hans, in about 1510, in silverpoint with white heightening on brown prepared paper (Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1943.3.3699) and a silverpoint drawing of his brother Endres, aged 30, in 1514, is in the Albertina, Vienna (inv. no. 3137) [19, no. 558]. Of the 11 pages of portraits in his famous silverpoint sketchbook made while touring the Netherlands in 1520–21, the drawing of his wife, Agnes, executed a few months later than the head of a young girl on the same page, shows Dürer's wonderful ability to contrast facial type and costume in delicate silverpoint lines (Vienna, Albertina, Figure 2.5). In addition to the portraits, often carefully inscribed with sitters' names, Dürer's small portable sketchbook is famous for its variety of views, still-lives, dogs and lions. From Dürer's diary made at the time that he was travelling in the Netherlands, we know that he used the metalpoint technique to make portraits on sheets of a larger size than his sketchbook. This description written in June 1521 offers a tantalising glimpse of the artist meeting his famous Dutch contemporary, Lucas van Leyden:

Master Lucas, who engraves in copper, asked me to be his guest [for dinner]. He is a little chap (*ein kleines männlein*) born in Leyden in Holland, but presently



FIGURE 2.5 *Head of a young girl in Cologne and Agnes Dürer on the Rhine near Boppard* by Albrecht Dürer 1521, Albertina, Vienna, inv. no. 22385 D.143.

visiting Antwerp ... I sketched Lucas van Leyden in silverpoint.

Today, this sheet is in the Musée des Beaux Arts, Lille (inv. no. Pl 918) [19; no. 816]. Dürer's large drawing of *Katharina*, the servant of João Brandão, the royal trade representative of the Portuguese ambassador in Antwerp, also dates from this period. Now in the Uffizi, Florence (inv. no. 1060E), it is one of Dürer's most magnificent portraits in any technique and one of the most sensitive portrayals of a black African woman of all time: the way in which the light plays over her face and the texture of the watered silk of her gown are particularly impressive [12; p. 72]. Towards the end of his career, Dürer made several outstanding silverpoint portraits of leading members of the Imperial Council including Friedrich II, Elector Palatine (SL, 5218.20) who took charge of the Imperial Council in Nuremberg while the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, was away in Spain. They include Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, Elector of Mainz, drawn in 1523 (Paris, Musée du Louvre) [19; no. 896], considered by many to be the finest of the group, and Duke Friedrich the Wise of Saxony (Paris, École des Beaux-Arts) [19; no. 897]. The duke's court painter, Lucas Cranach the Elder, who evidently accompanied his master to Nuremberg, was likewise drawn in silverpoint by Dürer in 1524 (Bayonne, Musée Bonnat) [19; no. 898].

As a little known addendum to the work of Dürer in the metalpoint medium, an inventory from 1580 of the estate of Willibald Imhoff (1519–1580) lists two silverpoint tablets, now presumed lost, attributed to the artist. Imhoff was the grandson of Dürer's close friend Willibald Pirckheimer, whose library he had inherited in 1530; in 1560 he then acquired the Dürer estate from Regina Hirnkofen, a relative of Albrecht Dürer's brother Endres, who inherited the artist's estate on the death of Agnes Dürer in 1539. The Imhoff inventory describes them as: '*Zwo hülzene taffel* [i.e. on wood] *mit etlichen prettern* [with a few boards, i.e. pages] *darein Albrecht Dürer von der handt, mit einem silberen griffel gerissen* [inside drawn by hand by Dürer with a silverpoint]' [20; pp. 303–5]. They are both listed in the Imhoff holdings sold to the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II in Prague in 1588, but in a later inventory of 1607/11 only one *tafelbüchlin* is mentioned: it is described as containing silverpoint drawings by the young Dürer [21]. It is tempting to speculate what the young artist would have drawn on such tablets, but it is likely that he made drawings to record designs to be circulated within a workshop, such as the handful of other early wooden tablets of this type to have survived [12; pp. 65–6].

While metalpoint died out across Europe by the 1530s, surprisingly it continued to be used in the Low Countries until the end of the 17th century. The majority of surviving



FIGURE 2.6 *Sergeant*, engraved by Jacques de Gheyn II, after Hendrick Goltzius, The British Museum, London, inv. no. 1864,1114.468 (© Trustees of the British Museum).

sheets are small studies of heads which were preparatory works for portrait engravings. These were usually done on *tafeletten*, thickly prepared sheets of vellum that were originally bound in small leather volumes and therefore quite sturdy and practical to carry outdoors. This meant that metalpoint could be easily practised outside of the workshop and that artists could visit their patrons at home to draw their portraits or make topographical views on their travels.

The most prolific metalpoint artist in the northern Netherlands was Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), who worked in Haarlem. He was the most talented portraitist of his generation and therefore much in demand by the

political and cultural elite wishing to have their likenesses recorded. Around 100 small sheets have survived by Goltzius, mostly dating from the 1580s, and the *tafeletten* he drew range from portrait studies, animals and botanical studies to informal sketches of his family members. Their small size and the fact that many sheets are drawn on both sides indicate that they originated from pocket-sized drawing books, which were cut up by the artist himself or by later collectors.

A stunning example is Goltzius' *Self-portrait wearing a hat and wide ruff* (1895,0915.1020) dated c.1589, Figure 4.31. This sheet is highly finished and all details have been worked up with some areas washed in green-blue

and grey in order to add more modelling to the portrait (see Section 4.8.3). Goltzius is holding a copper plate and burin and clearly wanted to portray himself as a successful artist, wearing rich clothes and staring confidently at the viewer. No prints exist of this portrait so this was probably a presentation drawing to one of Goltzius' patrons or friends. Interestingly, the back of the sheet contains a very summary sketch of a camel, an exotic animal which Goltzius must have seen somewhere in a menagerie (see Section 5). Differences in subject, style and technique between both sides could not be greater therefore it must be assumed that Goltzius drew the camel first and later decided to use the back of the same sheet to draw his self-portrait.

Another example of Goltzius' use of a drawing book can be seen in *Three studies of a man's head* (1895,0915.1021) where he sketched the same man three times, Figure 4.36a. The male model's head has been used as a print study, now recognised in an engraving of 1587 in which he is represented as a sergeant wearing a large feathered hat, Figure 2.6.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, faint erased lines above the hats, suggestive of feathers, were discovered during the technical examination project (see Section 4.8.3). Goltzius made numerous portrait sketches in which the face and hair are highly detailed, while the rest of the body or clothes remain unfinished or are sketched summarily to be completed later using stock motifs from other sources. This also applies to a sketch on the back of this sheet, which shows a three-quarter length portrait of a man captioned in Dutch 'Huigh the standard-bearer'. Goltzius' handling of the metalpoint is so precise and minutely detailed that almost all his portrait studies appear photographically realistic.

Another *Self-portrait* (1854,1113.230), created much later by Goltzius, is dated 1605 and is not as successful as the earlier portraits, Figure 4.34. It seems that the artist had abandoned working in metalpoint by this time and was no longer so skilled with the technique. The portrait appears a lot stiffer and the dedication in the lower margin suggests that the drawing was probably produced in response to a one-off request by a friend.

Although Goltzius was by far the most prolific user of metalpoint, other printmakers practised the technique in order to make precise portrait studies for engravings and to make outdoor sketches. The practice continued until the late 17th century, after which metalpoint drawing also ceased to be used by artists in the Low Countries.

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## NOTES

1. Cennino Cennini's description in his *Libro dell'arte* (Padua, c.1390) of preparing parchment and paper for use with a metal stylus suggests a well-established practice [1].
2. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, inv. no. C 775 [3; no. 12, 4; pp. 170–75]. The related painting is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, inv. no. GG975.
3. Where catalogue numbers are given in the text, these refer to works in the British Museum collection unless otherwise indicated. Further bibliographic references for British Museum works may be found in the online catalogue entries for individual drawings available from [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/search.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx).
4. The main repositories of Holbein's silverpoints are Kunstmuseum, Basel [9; cat. 167–85], Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin [10] and Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen [11; cat. 10–19].
5. Basel Kunstmuseum, Kupferstichkabinett, U.XX (120) [13]. The second silverpoint sketchbook in Basel contained at least 12 sheets of portrait drawings of c.1512–15; it was taken apart by 1833.
6. See [14; cat. 31]; the Kaisheim altarpiece is in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
7. Engraved by Jacques de Gheyn II after Hendrick Goltzius; see for instance the British Museum, London, inv. no. 1864,1114.468 [22; cat. 183].